

W H O

The Metropolis Observed

Riingos and Oranges? hospitality

Japan meets America (by way of a Swedish chef) in the design of a Manhattan restaurant.

Skimming the menu at Riingo can be a jarring experience. The new restaurant, located in Midtown Manhattan's swank Alex Hotel, serves both eel-avocado maki and cheeseburgers. Yet the intimate space, designed by architect Glen Coben, manages to reflect the cuisine while avoiding any sense of discordance. According to co-owner Marcus Samuelsson, celebrated chef of the haute-Scandinavian restaurant Aquavit, "The whole concept of Riingo is that it's Japanese and yet contemporary American, minimalist but warm." In Riingo (the name is a quirky transliteration of the Japanese word for "apple"), materials of each aesthetic—bamboo, for example, as well as stainless steel—coalesce into an ecumenically elegant interior.

Diners enter from the lobby into a standard hotel bar, complete with a 36-inch TV (cleverly hidden behind a mirror—invisible when off, perfectly visible through the reflective glass when on). To the left an inviting Carrera marble staircase spills down from a mezzanine. "The mezzanine has a community sense, with a long table for private parties," Coben says. "It also has a sense of floating." Situated between the front and back of the restaurant, it overlooks both the bar and the dramatic double-height dining room in the rear. "The original idea was that the kitchen would go back there in that soaring space, but then we came and looked at it, and said, Oh my god, this is the best part." The kitchen was relocated beneath the mezzanine; the atypical sushi bar, a low gleaming Corian counter, bridges the bar and the dining room.

Suffused lighting, bamboo floors, and textured plaster walls give both the mezzanine and the back room a feeling of cozy sophistication. "We had to paint the walls four times to get that texture," says Samuelsson, who collaborated closely on the project. There is a variety of seating, including square tables for two, a long banquet, and round booths of various sizes—all made of ebony-stained oak. Enchantingly, each contains a light fixture sandwiched between the tabletop and another slab of wood beneath.

Coben stresses the unique demands posed by designing a



Glen Coben's design for Marcus Samuelsson's new restaurant Riingo is a balancing act, bridging Japanese and contemporary American influences and appealing to both hotel guests and other customers.

hotel restaurant, which must accommodate hotel guests but also attract and please other customers. In fact, the Alex Hotel, which opened last year, was designed by David Rockwell, whose firm Coben left in 2000 to form his own, Glen & Company. "We want the customers to feel that they are in a distinct environment, not the Alex restaurant," Coben says. The bar's marble floor is one subtle sign of this effort: its materials and color palette are the same as the adjacent lobby's, but the pattern is modified. "That's one of the challenges of designing a hotel restaurant," Coben says. "The other is figuring out where the TV goes." —Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow